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Bernard Wilson

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## 'Do You Wish to Join This Society or Not?': The Paradox of Nationhood in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*

### Abstract

Lloyd Fernando is one of three prose writers (the other two being Lee Kok Liang and K.S. Maniam) who should rightfully be considered at the forefront of Malaysian literature written in English. Despite stylistic differences, each of these authors, through their examination of postcolonialism, marginalisation, and the painful quest for cultural and racial unification, has asked significant questions concerning hybrid or ethnocentric identity. All three provide local settings pregnant with oppositions, all three employ shifting natural landscapes in their writing as backgrounds to the issues of multiple identity that have emerged from Malaysia's colonial past and multiracial present. Central to their beliefs, to borrow from Homi Bhabha, is that nation may only be achieved through dissemination and re-birth, and that acknowledgment of difference must lead first to acceptance — and then embracement — of racial and cultural 'otherness'.

BERNARD WILSON

## **'Do You Wish to Join This Society or Not?': The Paradox of Nationhood in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid***

No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are no more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind.

(Edward Said *Culture and Imperialism*)

I have but sparse, thin words,  
threadbare against the touch of ice  
and wind, words bereft  
of power as charm against  
prospect of your travail,  
and of your dangerous passage over black gulfs.

(Wong Phui Nam 'Terminal Ward')

Lloyd Fernando is one of three prose writers (the other two being Lee Kok Liang and K.S. Maniam) who should rightfully be considered at the forefront of Malaysian literature written in English. Despite stylistic differences, each of these authors, through their examination of postcolonialism, marginalisation, and the painful quest for cultural and racial unification, has asked significant questions concerning hybrid or ethnocentric identity. All three provide local settings pregnant with oppositions, all three employ shifting natural landscapes in their writing as backgrounds to the issues of multiple identity that have emerged from Malaysia's colonial past and multiracial present. Central to their beliefs, to borrow from Homi Bhabha, is that nation may only be achieved through *dissemination* and re-birth, and that acknowledgment of difference must lead first to acceptance — and then embracement — of racial and cultural 'otherness'.

Fernando's brooding, violent landscapes and structural juxtapositions mirror the paradox inherent in his subject matter: one must jettison identity in order to create identity. He examines, in his own words, the effects of 'detribalization anxiety'<sup>1</sup> and the consequent threat for individuals who seek a broader multicultural perspective of an existence in flux:

A person becomes aware, at some point, that the effort of cultural growth and development and the dedication to a widening sensibility have no foreseeable natural conclusion but are part of an unceasing process, capable of continuing as if in infinite series, with every stage of the series having no lasting validity.<sup>2</sup>

Such a problematic position has, as Fernando is quick to point out, many interstices with the literature of Conrad (and to a lesser extent Forster), but while Conrad examines the effects of encountering alterity from the dominant and external Eurocentric viewpoint, Fernando analyses this phenomenon very much from within his own geographical, and psychological, terrain. Thus, those races and cultures that people the margins of the Conradian text are given voices and repositioned at the centre — rather than the periphery — of the text. Fernando's thrust, however, is not towards the relationship between colonial and postcolonial and the redressing of that balance but, rather, he seeks to address the lingering sense of Diaspora that exists for many Malaysians.

As such, *Scorpion Orchid*,<sup>3</sup> Fernando's first novel (published in 1976), is as relevant to the political machinations and ethnic divisions that exist in contemporary Malaysia as it was when it was first released. Though Singapore — where the principal action of *Scorpion Orchid* is set — may be seen to have made considerable progress in addressing such divisions and differences (albeit through at times draconian restrictions regarding freedom of speech and legitimate political opposition), Fernando's novel still provides a pertinent message regarding the path to racial integration and national identity to both countries.

On the surface, the novel relates the story of four individuals representing the four principal racial groups of Singapore during the racial riots and political upheaval of the 1950s. Sabran (Malay), Guan Kheng (Chinese), Santinathan (Indian) and Peter (Eurasian) are idealistic university students whose naive faith in a shared future is exploded against a backdrop of violence and recriminations. At a more complex level, the novel is a cacophony of disparate voices echoing the concerns and confusion of Singapore in the 1950s and, to a certain extent, the continuing complexities arising from racial integration in contemporary Malaysia. But Fernando does not limit those voices to the four central characters. Rather, *Scorpion Orchid* is an experimental canvas in which the author forces the reader to constantly shift focus through the use of historical and pseudo-historical textual interpolations, European expatriate interpretations of the riots, and dire warnings from the nebulous and enigmatic symbol of Tok Said, seen by Abdul Majid b. N. Baksh as 'the embodiment of the Malaysian consciousness, a psychological entity akin to the Spiritus Mundi of Yeats'.<sup>4</sup>

Central to the four young men's sense of unity is the flawed perception of a common enemy — in this case British colonialism — but at the heart of the matter is the fact that the enemy exists within their own increasingly fraught relationships and what each has come to represent to the others. It is only the waitress Sally who, as martyred prostitute, evoking the image of a fusion of Christ and Mary Magdalene, comes close to understanding the paradoxical and protean nature of unity:

They are frightened, all of them, as if they are running away from something and want to rest. Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, I give them rest, I know they are confused, they talk bad of one another sometimes — sometimes even they get angry. But when they are with me they become calm, they don't argue, they don't talk. Why shouldn't this be called love too? (p. 120)

Sally is both nature and nurture, a personification of the all-embracing qualities of Malaysia, and it is her understanding of the tenuous bonds that hold these cultures together, and her function as a receptacle for the boys' racial (and sexual) insecurities, that necessitates her chameleon-like depiction in the story. On several occasions, she is portrayed as either distinctly Chinese or Malay and often as both, a blurring of racial boundaries that both fascinates and terrifies Ghuan Keng, who begins to seek 'the stabilising sense of his own past' (p. 79):

They spoke Cantonese in public, Malay in bed. Her Malay was better than her Cantonese, its fluency frightened him. He knew no other Chinese who spoke it so well. It made him feel left on a shoal amidst a swift-flowing river. (p. 79)

But Sally's propensity to transcend race (and language) is also the cause of her spiritual and physical destruction by those not yet ready to accept fluid identity. The harsh reality of the world in the streets — a reality understood only too well by Sally — is juxtaposed against the isolated and ideological world of the university. Her marginalisation (and brutalisation) is linked to her gender and profession, but most particularly to an indistinctness of physical and linguistic racial determinates in a time when homogeneity is crucial to a sense of belonging and protection. That the blame for this lies with all of the racial groups in Malaysia is clear; despite Sally's close physical and spiritual bonds with the four male protagonists, she is abandoned and betrayed. In describing her rape as 'multiracial' (p. 123) the author conveys a clear message. The colonial period no longer exists. In this fragile, new society no one group may claim victimisation; all are responsible for creating a purposeful shared future.

Santinathan, Sabran, Ghuan Kheng and Peter also experience this sense of betrayal in varying degrees, yet for each it represents the betrayal of a collective idealistic past, of a 'blunt comradeship' that has dissipated in the face of a harsh, uncertain future. Only Peter suffers actual physical harm and, of the central male characters, his physical features dictate that he will perceive himself as the most marginalised. His face and languages are signifiers of both the colonised and the coloniser, and it is particularly the power of language to redefine identity that Peter is most aware of:

I was born in Malacca speaking Portuguese. That's because the Portuguese colonised us so many hundred years ago. The Dutch didn't stay long enough, or I suppose it's a toss up I would be speaking Dutch instead now. Anyway the result was no one outside understood the Portuguese I spoke. Then because the British had ousted the Dutch, I learnt English and forgot my Portuguese. It was like taking out the parts and organs of my body and replacing them with others. Then the Japs came and we were told to forget English, learn Japanese. So once more I began taking out parts and putting in new ones — unlearning my language and learning another. Now it seems I must unlearn it once more and learn Malay. (pp. 142–43)

Peter's argument is a self-explanatory one: the process of colonisation is never complete and is never-ending. The individual is only truly colonised (and for colonised one may also read achieving a concrete sense of self) when he or she believes that he or she *belongs*. The negative connotations of such a thesis are clear; identity for those who are marginalised, in these terms, is to seek total colonisation rather than be confronted by a multiplicity of identities.

'Do you wish to join our society or not?' is both the specific and covert refrain of the novel, but Fernando cannot provide any comfortable answer. Rather, as Zalina Mohd Lazim<sup>5</sup> and Koh Tai Ann<sup>6</sup> have pointed out, he redresses Eurocentric notions of history to provide a multi-layered Malaysian sense of one's past. Ultimately, Peter announces his return to Singapore, having gained insight from his two years in England — yet his statements ('I love Malaya. I love Singapore. I didn't realise how much until I came here' [p. 156]) somehow ring hollow. The very structure of Fernando's novel, offering multifarious dialogues and seemingly incompatible versions of the same historical events from opposing views, suggests that Peter's new-found belief in his origins and renewed optimism are necessarily flawed — yet unquestionably vital to the creation of nationhood. Though Shirley Lim sees these fragments moving 'in an ever increasing arc of optimism to Peter's final statement of his "return passage"'<sup>7</sup> and, indeed, his letter provides perspective and some resolution to the plight of the colonised, his sentiments are less convincing when taken in conjunction with the overall structure of the novel, positioned as they are in the ironic gaps between historical point and counterpoint. It is clear that language for Peter, whether in Singapore or England, bears the burden of association with imperialism. It is also paradoxically clear that though a mutual language is a superficial solution, verbal communication is nevertheless crucial to eliminating the racial polarisation that can exist in such a society. To go some way towards avoiding binary divisions, that communication must be, in Bakhtinian terms, heteroglossic rather than superficially monoglossic — a theme which Fernando further explores in his second novel, *Green is the Colour*, and one which is clarified by Bakhtin's explanation:

Languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each of which in its own way reflects a little piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp behind their inter-reflecting aspects for a world that is broader, more multi-levelled and multi-horizoned than would be available to one language, one mirror.<sup>8</sup>

It follows then, that Peter's sense of colonial burden, and the implications that this carries, are of less concern to the author than the possibility of multiple dialogues between cultures within Malaysia and the unifying potential for nationhood that such a situation offers. Indeed, Fernando has increasingly seen the binary divisions between colonial and postcolonial enforced by some literary theorists as outdated and anachronistic. In a paper entitled 'Postcolonialism: Caught in a Time Warp?' delivered at a conference organised by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 1994, he attacks those 'critics of formidable skill' who seek to place writers of new literature 'back into colonial captivity'.<sup>9</sup> Fernando eloquently argues that to be delineated as either 'colonial' or 'postcolonial' is to

be caught in the classic false dilemma — and further, that the so-called postcolonial subject has far less chance of escape than the colonial subject. Divisions, in Fernando's terms, no longer exist between coloniser and colonised. Such a view is anachronistic and, in terms of the analysis of new literatures, irresponsible:

The colonial period is over; the use of the colonial theme as the distinguishing criterion for literatures in English is a non-starter.<sup>10</sup>

To avoid this false binary dialectic one must, he claims, acknowledge that there is no longer a centre — at least in literary terms — or at the very least, that this centre is fluid. To acknowledge that one inhabits the periphery is to admit defeat, for in doing so one posits oneself firmly in the position of 'lesser'. And it is this spatial dilemma that each of the four young men must confront.

The response of each of the central characters — with the notable exception of Sally, who has already achieved insight through suffering, yet is still able to love — is to retreat, in varying degrees, into what he perceives as his racial and cultural heritage. Such a solution, the action of the novel makes clear, can only provide temporary solace. But though the colonial theme no longer holds credence in Fernando's terms, it is nevertheless crucial that the racial and cultural issues confronting Malaysians are addressed. The reactions of the central characters to the ethnic violence they encounter is to attribute characteristics and nature according to race and to hide in the comforting cocoon of what they perceive to be their own racial identity. In doing so, the former binary division between coloniser and colonised is replaced by a racial sense of 'self' and 'other'. Though Sabran initially sees his relationship with Santinathan as 'being attuned, words were no longer necessary' (p. 59), when confronted with the harsh realities and divisions of the riots, their bonds are shown to be fragile:

They confronted each other, a momentary island in a seething crowd, trying to find the words which would keep their friendship intact. At last Sabran turned away saying curtly, 'Peter was right. You're a foreigner too.' (p. 73)

The individuals who represent the four racial groups in *Scorpion Orchid* may seek temporary comfort through identification with their ancestry but this myopic attempt at resolution will prove transitory. Rather, they must forge bonds through more permanent links: specifically, a sense of shared humanity and, in particular, a physical connection with the land. But are such links sufficient to provide unity and a sense of common purpose? Peter's proposed return and renewed faith in his country offer some optimism, but it is an optimism that has been undercut in the text by the betrayal of Sally, the shadowy Tok Said's apocalyptic prophecies and the disintegration and displacement of the principal characters. Ultimately, Fernando shows, there is no pat solution. If the multicultural ideal is to shed the entrapment of homogeneity by embracing plurality, one is confronted by the possibility that faces Conrad's Marlowe:

Heterogeneity in its ultimate form threatens a kind of valuelessness which accompanies indiscriminate change, where homogeneity at the other end of the scale is a prison.<sup>11</sup>

Significantly, Fernando offers little in the way of concrete reassurance. He does, however, offer encouragement. Reiterating the warning implicit in the title of his novel, Fernando borrows from the Pelayaran Abdullah to convey a final message of guarded hope:

All along the river as you go upstream there are homesteads, and in the river there are fierce crocodiles. (p. 157)

One senses that this will not be the final stage of the journey. Peter, like the cultures and races that make up what he now sees as his nation, must learn that identity is a fluid concept. To remain still is to stagnate.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd Fernando, *Cultures in Conflict* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1986), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd Fernando, *Scorpion Orchid* (Singapore: Times, 1992). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Abdul Majid b. N. Baksh, 'The Malaysian Racial Dilemma in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*', *Southeast Asian Review of English*, No. 3, December, 1981, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> Zalina Mohd Lazim, 'Emerging Voices in *Scorpion Orchid*', *A View of Our Own: Ethnocentric Perspectives in Literature* (Malaysia: Fakulti Pengajian Bahasa, 1996), pp. 284–89.

<sup>6</sup> Koh Tai Ann, in Zalina Mohd Lazim, p. 285.

<sup>7</sup> Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, *Writing South East Asia in English: Against the Grain, Focus on Asian English Language Literatures* (London: Skoob, 1994), p. 145.

<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, in Craig Brandist, 'The Bakhtin Circle', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/b/bakhtin.htm>, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Lloyd Fernando, 'Postcolonialism: Caught in a Time Warp?', *A View of Our Own: Ethnocentric Perspectives in Literature* (Malaysia: Fakulti Pengajian Bahasa, 1996), p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Fernando, *Cultures in Conflict*, p. 14.